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ABSTRACT

This paper describes a higher education assessment process of the general education program at Longwood College, Virginia. A list of the attributes of a good general education program is presented. This is followed by a description of Longwood College's assessment methodology starting with the development of a list of goals that were considered as defining general education. Finally, an explanation of the curriculum-embedded assessment program used in developing a new General Education Course Survey is briefly reviewed ending with a description of how the process has benefitted the school and faculty in reaching its general education goals. The appendix, comprising nearly the entire paper, contains: (1) lists of the general education goals and general education criteria at Longwood College, (2) a copy of the school's Course Criteria Survey, (3) various charts and graphs resulting from the assessment process, and (4) a list of the assessment-driven changes related to general education at Longwood. (GLR)

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General Education Assessment: Grappling with Godzilla

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General Education Assessment: Grappling with Godzilla

Yes, the title is apt and anyone who has attempted to develop an assessment program for general education knows it. (I actually thought of several other titles for this paper but they all involved the use of multiple obscene words, so I deferred out of discretion.) General education assessment is the most difficult piece of an assessment program because of its diffuse constituency and, too often, lack of clear focus.

As a retired director of assessment who has grappled with Godzilla for four years (and three years before that as a charter member of our assessment steering committee), I have come to recognize certain attributes of a good general education program. They are as follows:

1. A good general education assessment program should generate useful data to improve the program. This is its reason for being and where most standardized tests of general education knowledge and skills come up short. Assessment without change is a waste of time and resources, and only, I believe, a curriculum-embedded assessment program will fit this bill.

2. A good general education assessment program should be "do-able," i.e., manageable and affordable. It shouldn't break your back or your bank. It can't work if it overwhelms the system.

3. A good general education assessment program should be "acceptably imperfect" and evolutionary. The cry for perfection is the surest way to sink the ship. It will inevitably be imperfect but, like a good wine, it should improve with age.

4. A good general education assessment program should assess the focus of the general education program. Unfortunately, many general education programs have grown like kudzu to feed academic turf needs rather than staying within the limits of academic integrity. Most faculty would not accept a paper from a student that had the lack of focus many of our general education programs have. Assessment can help re-focus general education and give it integrity and coherence.

5. A good general education assessment program must have a "linch-pin" to hold it together. And that, almost certainly, will be the director of assessment -- who, ideally, will have the academic and faculty credentials to be credible in the area of general education. While faculty committees play an essential part in the governance of general education, committee turn-over is frequently high and assessment expertise is frequently low. The director of assessment must play a central role here, in prompting, reminding, following-up, persuading, coordinating,

facilitating, and in, yes, doing some of the "grunt work."

6. A good general education assessment program must have the support of the chief academic officer. If the chief academic officer doesn't believe in assessment then neither will department chairs and faculty. The message from the top must be that assessment is an integral part of a quality program.

In 1989, the faculty at my institution, after a decade of work, completed a revision of our general education program. The old program had grown to the point where it had lost its focus -- in fact, we had lost count of the number of courses that counted for general education credit. The new program is more focused and coherent. It is structured around ten goals that define the content of the program (mathematics, English, natural sciences, social sciences, etc.) and it specifies nine "criteria" that all general education courses must meet. These criteria represent general skills and perspectives that we believe are integral to general education (things like writing, using computers, library skills, thinking, creativity, etc.).(See Appendix A for goals and criteria.)

At the same time, we developed, with advice from assessment gnome Peter Ewell, a curriculum-embedded assessment program for our new general education program. Here is how it works: We developed a General Education Course Criteria Survey (see Appendix B for this survey) to assess how well we are addressing the nine criteria of the general education program. The survey has a pair of items for each criterion (actually, two criteria are "double-barreled", hence there are 22 items on the survey, not 18). One item of each pair asks students whether their instructor met the criterion, e.g., required them to write as part of the class; the other item asks students if they perceived that they benefitted from the criterion, e.g., their writing improved as a result of the class. The survey is given to one section (a sample) of every general education course offered in the fall semester (a cycle of once per year).

Hence, we have a track record showing the extent to which our faculty are meeting the criteria of the general education program, e.g., requiring written work or the use of computers, etc., in their general education classes, and the extent to which our students perceive that they are benefitting from these criteria, e.g., writing better or using computers better, etc. We have used these data to make changes in our program to address the weaknesses shown by the data. As a result, in the three years we have been using this survey, there have been gains on 21 of the 22 items on the survey (see Appendix C for graphs of these data). That is, in regard to the criteria, we can document that our general education program is getting better, and we have done so with minimal effort.

In regard to the goals of the general education program, we agreed to assess two of the ten general education goals per year (a cycle of once every five years). Faculty in the targeted goal areas use common or similar exam questions or problems that cut across an agreed upon set of conceptual categories for that goal area. The results are displayed in a bar chart showing, for the students in that group of courses, the percent correct for the major conceptual categories of that goal area and give us a picture of the strengths and weaknesses of that goal area (see Appendix D for these graphs). Curricular changes are then proposed by the faculty teaching those courses to address the weaknesses shown by the data.

In the past three years, we have assessed six of the ten general education goals in this manner and we have substantially revised 40% of the courses within those goal areas to address weaknesses shown by the data. (See Appendix E for a sample of these assessment-driven changes.) And, once again, we have done so with relatively minimal effort. And it has cost us zero dollars.

General education assessment is a complex process that can only be done imperfectly. However, there are opportunities here to re-focus and improve our general education programs. A curriculum-embedded assessment program is the only way to generate this type of curricular change. The good news is that it can be done with minimal effort and minimal resources.

Appendix A

Longwood College
General Education Goals

Goal 1: The ability to write and speak logically, clearly, precisely, and the ability, through accurate reading and listening, to acquire, organize, present, and document information and ideas. (six credits)

Goal 2: An understanding of our cultural heritage as expressed in artistic achievements and an understanding of the contribution of the creative process to the life of the individual and to society. (three credits)

Goal 3: An understanding of our cultural heritage as revealed in literature, its movements and traditions, through reading, understanding, and analyzing the major works that have shaped our thinking and provide a record of human experience. (three credits)

Goal 4: An understanding of mathematical thought and the ability to conceptualize and apply mathematical logic to problem-solving; the ability to use computers for acquiring, processing and analyzing information. (three credits)

Goal 5: The application of the methods of science to the acquisition of knowledge, and an appreciation of the major contributions of science to our cultural heritage and to the solution of contemporary problems. (four credits)

Goal 6: An understanding of the foundations and history of western civilization, of the past as a mode for understanding the present. (three credits)

Goal 7: An understanding of other cultures and societies. (three credits)

Goal 8: An understanding of the forces shaping contemporary society as revealed in the social sciences. (three credits)

Goal 9: An understanding of issues dealing with physical and mental well-being, with opportunities for physical activity (three credits)

Goal 10: The ability to make informed, ethical choices and decisions, and to weigh the consequences of those choices. (one credit)

Longwood College
General Education Criteria

In addition to addressing one of the above ten goals, each core course is specifically designed to satisfy the following nine criteria:

1. General education courses should teach a disciplinary mode of inquiry (e.g., literary analysis, statistical analysis, historical interpretation, philosophical reasoning, aesthetic judgement, the scientific method) and provide students with practice in applying their disciplinary mode of inquiry, critical thinking, or problem-solving strategies.

2. General education courses should introduce creativity as a process and present examples.

3. General education courses should consider questions of ethical values.

4. General education courses should explore past, current, and future implications (e.g., social, political, economic, psychological, or philosophical) of disciplinary knowledge.

5. General education courses should encourage consideration of course content from diverse perspectives.

6. General education courses should provide opportunities for students to use computers for word processing, data base, spreadsheet, graphics, or other ways of organizing information.

7. General education courses should require at least one substantive written paper, oral report, or course journal. General education courses should also require students to articulate information or ideas in their own words on tests and exams.

8. General education courses should require specific assignments which necessitate use of library resources.

9. General education courses should foster awareness of the common elements among disciplines and the interconnectedness of disciplines.

Appendix B

General Education
Course Criteria Survey

All courses within the General Education Program are designed not only to satisfy one of the ten goals of general education but also to meet the nine criteria of general education (see Catalog p. 51).

Please help us to assess the value and effectiveness of the General Education Program by responding to the following 22 items on the accompanying computer answer sheet. Use the following code to fill in the circles on the answer sheet:

STRONGLY AGREE	fill in "A"
AGREE	fill in "B"
UNCERTAIN OR NOT APPLICABLE	fill in "C"
DISAGREE	fill in "D"
STRONGLY DISAGREE	fill in "E"

This survey is not intended as an evaluation of your instructor but rather as an assessment of how well this course addressed the general education criteria. Your instructor may explain items on this survey that may be unclear to you. Please do not fill in your name or identification number.

****

1. This course covered not only the content but also the methods of this field of study.

2. I have gained a better understanding of how people in this field solve problems or gain knowledge.

3. This course provided students with practice at applying critical thinking and/or the methods of inquiry as used in this field.

4. I can apply this knowledge to the world around me.

5. This course demonstrated how creative thinking, problem-solving, or behavior applies to this field of study.

6. I have gained a better understanding of how creative thinking, problem-solving, or behavior can lead to contributions in this field.

7. This course raised issues of ethics as they apply to this field of study.

8. I have a better understanding of how questions of values apply to this field.

OVER PLEASE

9. This course explored past, current, and future implications of this knowledge.

10. I gained an understanding of the past, current, and future implications of this knowledge.

11. This course covered diverse perspectives (theoretical, cultural, racial, gender, etc.).

12. I have gained a better understanding of the different points of view in this field.

13. At least one project or assignment in this course required the use of computers (for word processing, data base, spreadsheet, graphics, or other ways of organizing information).

14. I have maintained or enhanced my computer skills as a result of this course.

15. At least one written paper, oral report or course journal was assigned in this course.

16. I have learned how to write better as a result of this course.

17. The tests and exams required students to articulate information and ideas in their own words.

18. I have learned how to organize and express my ideas better on tests.

19. At least one project in this course required the use of library resources.

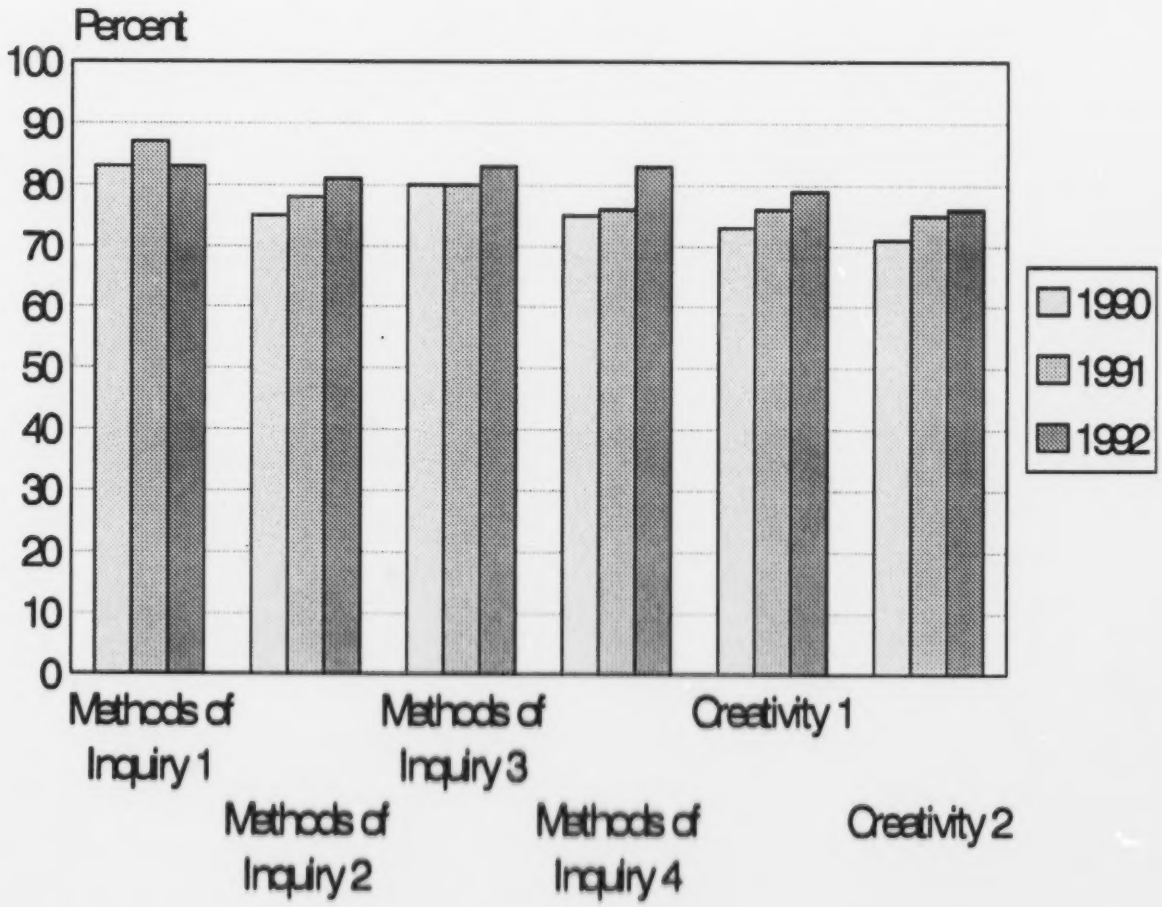
20. I have maintained or enhanced my library skills as a result of this course.

21. In this course, the subject matter was related to other disciplines or fields of study.

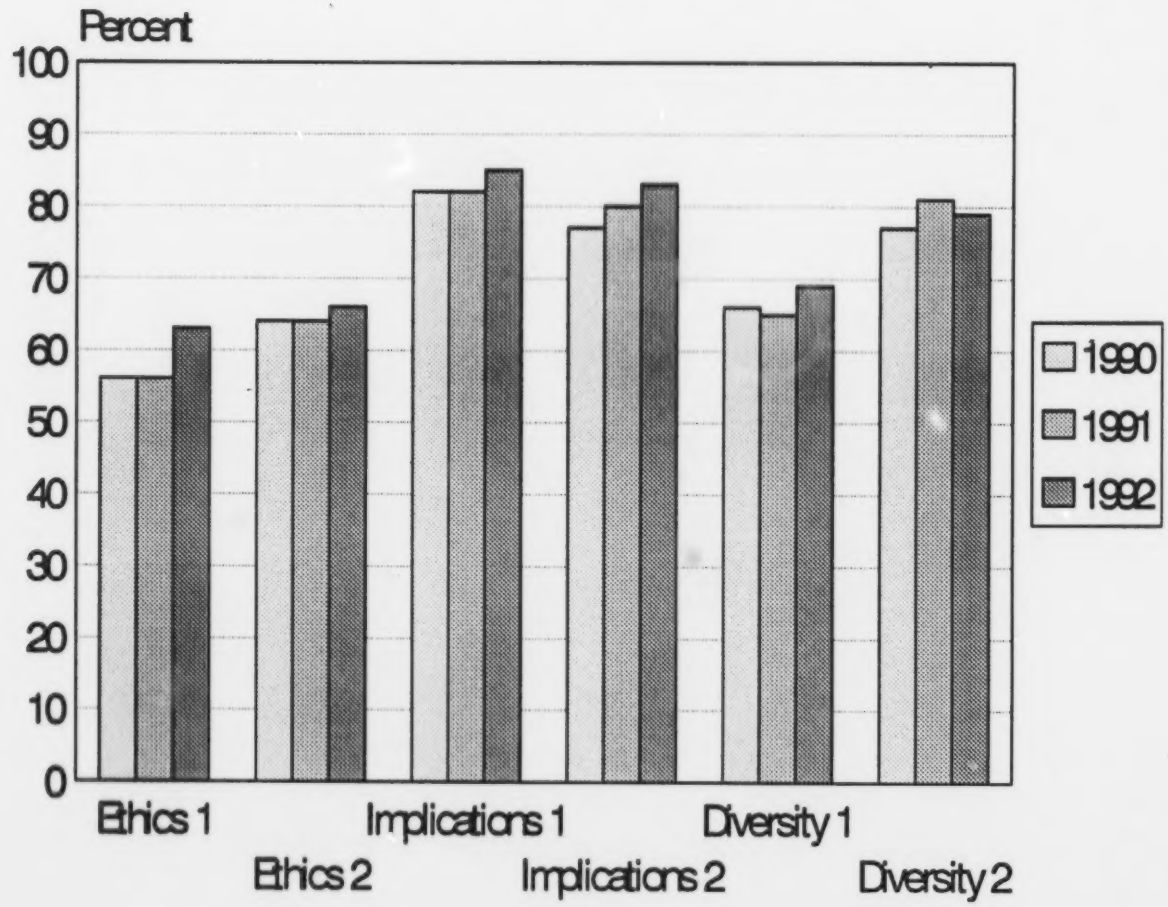
22. I have a better understanding of how the information covered in this course is related to information covered in my other courses.

Appendix C

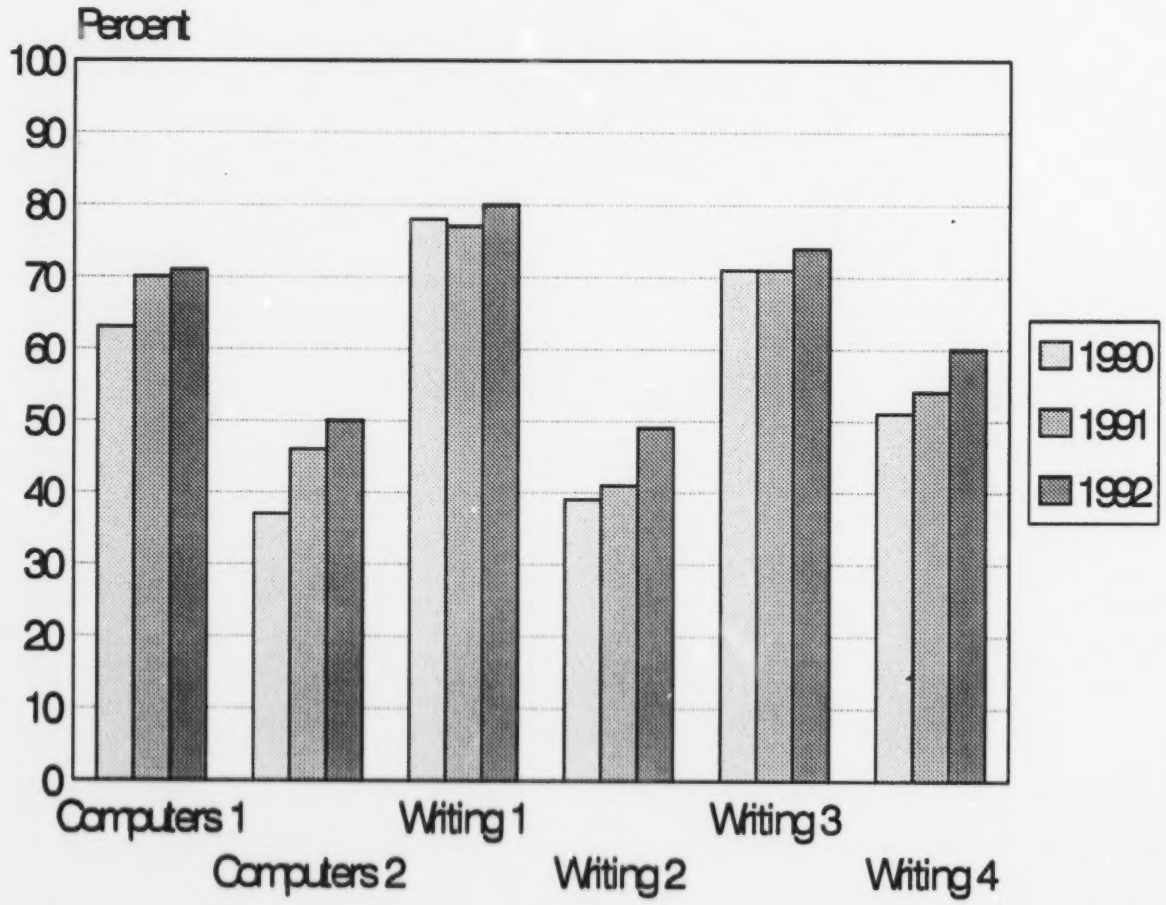
Course Criteria Graph 1



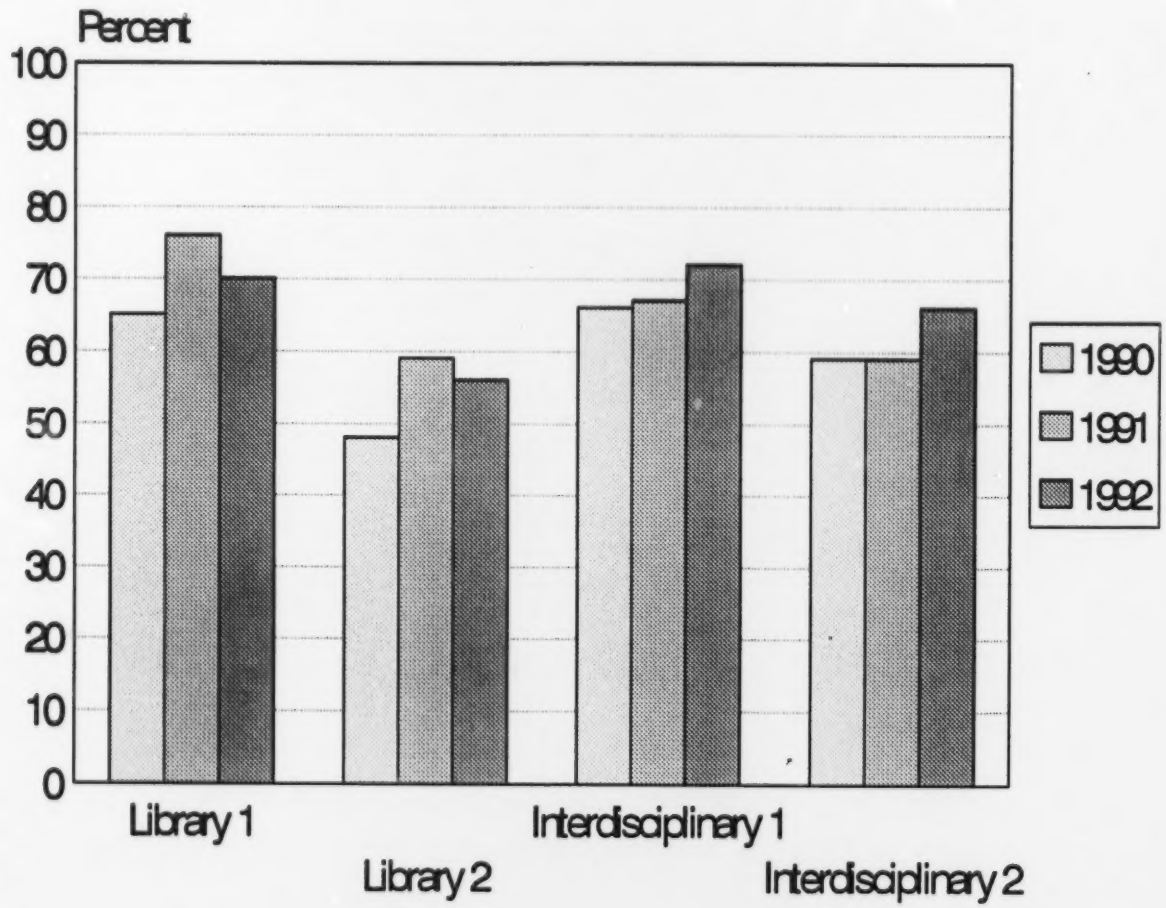
Course Criteria Graph 2



Course Criteria Graph 3

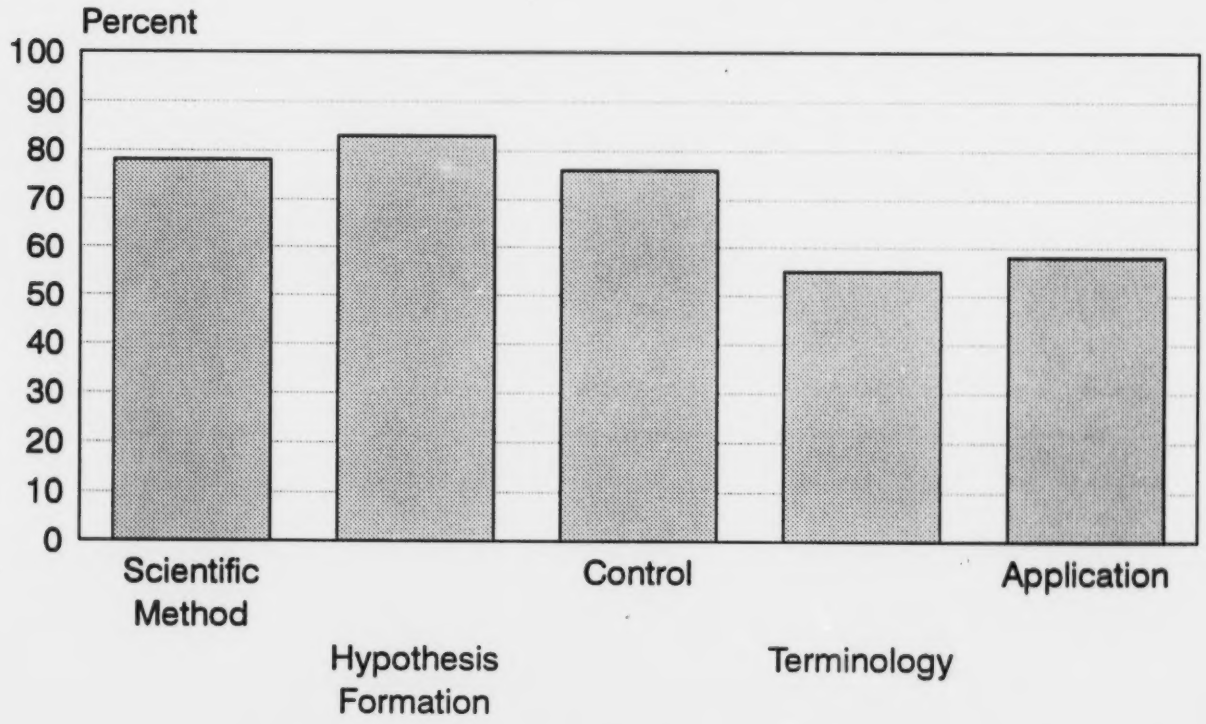


Course Criteria Graph 4

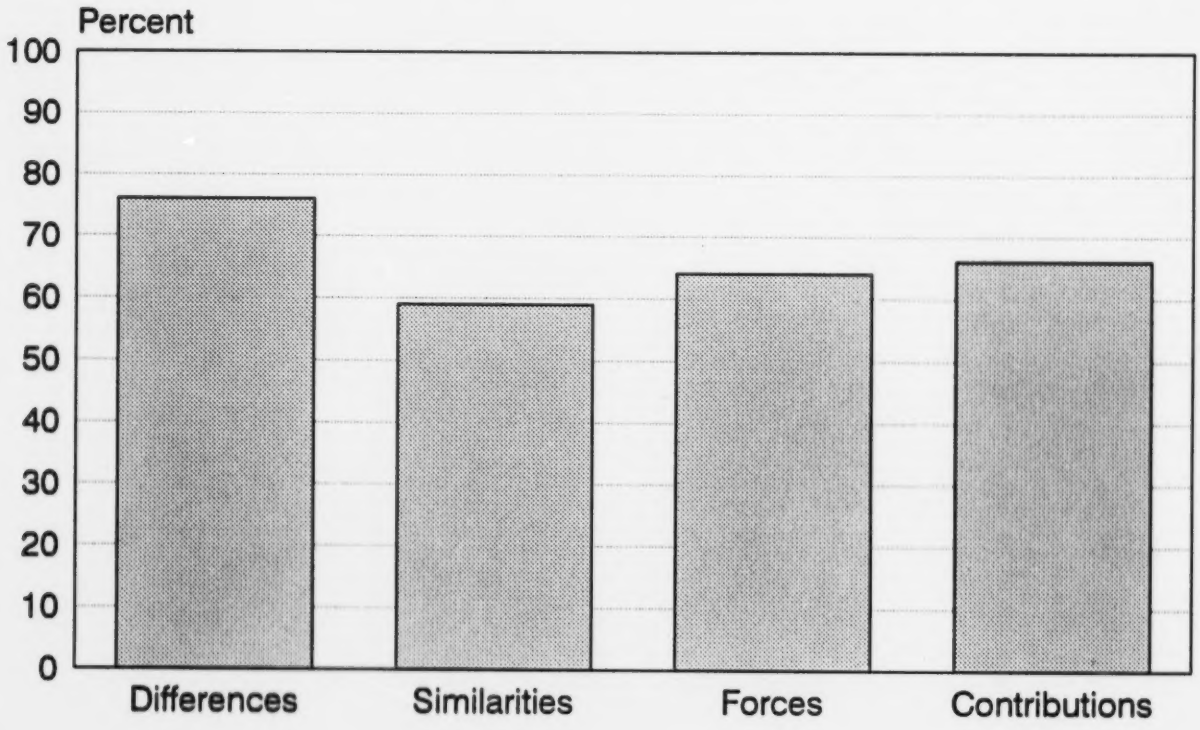


Appendix D

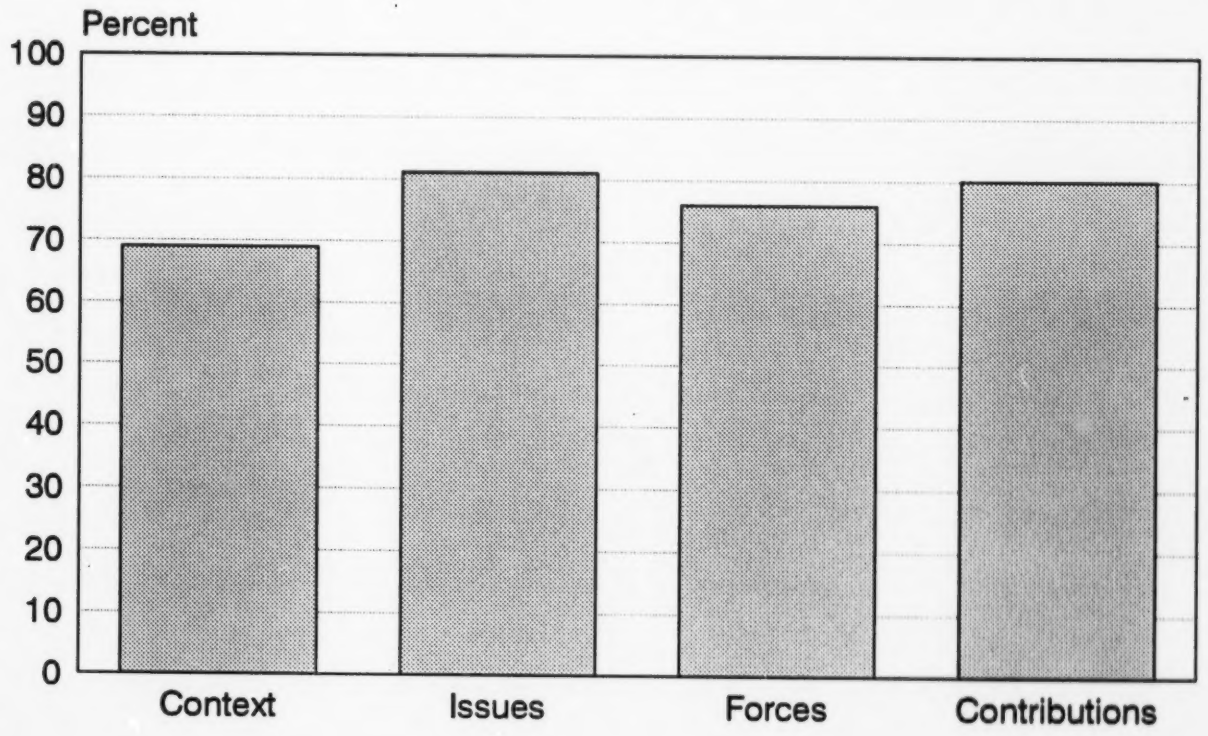
Goal 5: Natural Sciences



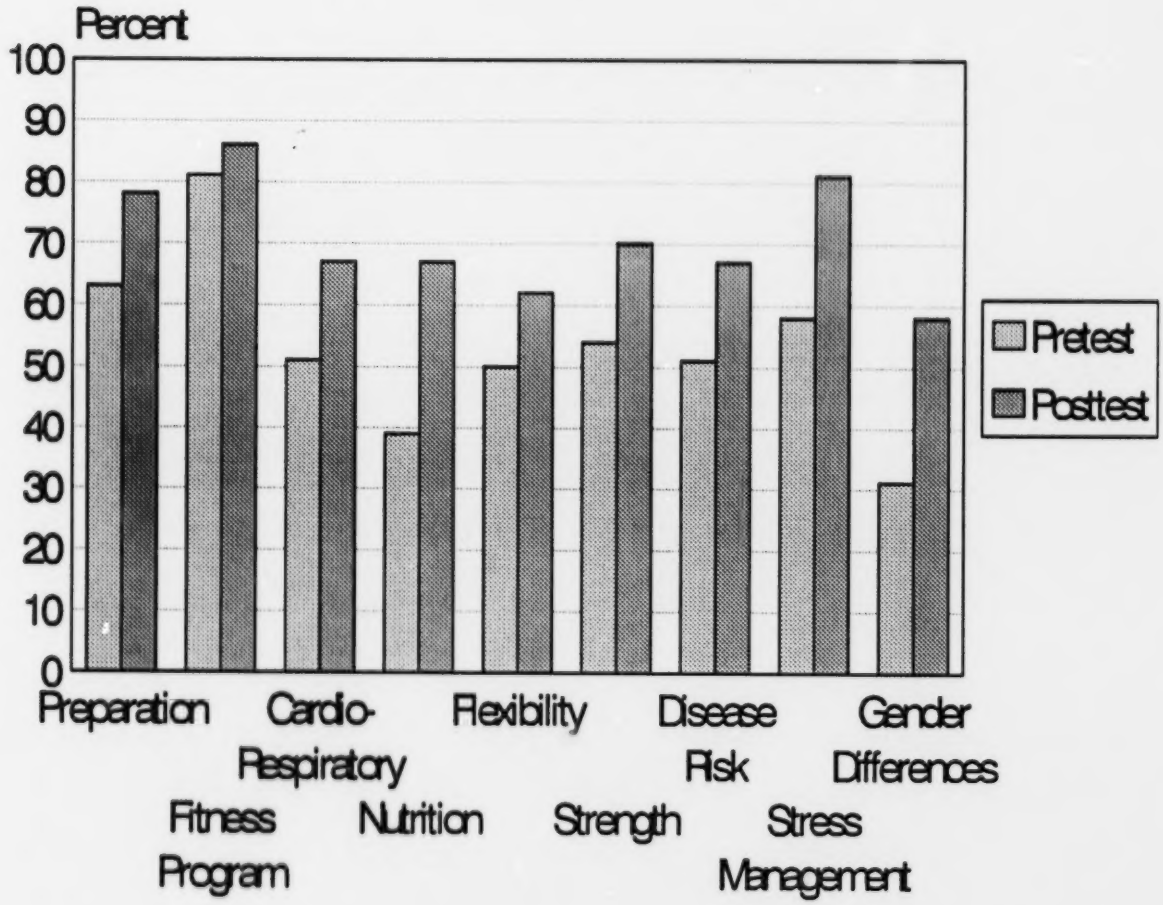
Goal 7: Non-Western Cultures



Goal 8: Social Sciences



Goal 9: Health



Appendix E

Assessment-Driven Changes
Related to General Education

* Linked support services more effectively to math courses
* Substantially revised two math courses to focus on application
* Implemented a writing-across-the-curriculum policy
* Sponsored three workshops on writing-across-the-curriculum
* Sponsored two workshops on oral communication
* Agreed to give more emphasis to the three weakest criteria
* Sponsored two workshops for faculty on computer applications
* Developed an on-going program of computer workshops for faculty and students
* Incorporated a computer orientation class period in the freshman seminar
* Completed purchase of computers for all faculty
* Used U21 funds to buy equipment to support math courses
* Sponsored a workshop on diversity
* Supported the "other cultures" goal with a grant project
* Substantially revised a chemistry course to focus on applications
* Significantly revised the HPER Gaol 9 course
* Standardized and refined the physical and cognitive testing procedures for the Goal 9 course